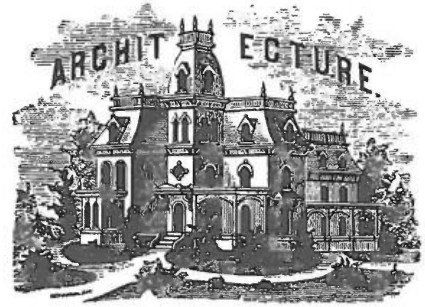


# A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



## William R. Miller 1866-1929

Few architects in Maine produced designs as flamboyant and picturesque as William Robinson Miller. With a state-wide practice, based first in Lewiston and later, with Raymond J. Mayo, in Portland, Miller specialized in schools, libraries, hotels, and other structures intended for public use. The firm of William R. Miller lasted from 1896 until 1907, when it became Miller & Mayo.

Born in Durham on September 20, 1866, William was the son of Simon and Josephine Robinson Miller. He attended Bates College in the mid-1880s before working as a draftsman in the Lewiston office of George M. Coombs, the leading architect in western Maine. After two or three years in Coombs' office, Miller attended the School of Architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1891-92. While a student, he submitted competition drawings for the Maine State Building at the Chicago World's Fair.<sup>1</sup> According to one source, he travelled abroad

for a year; but by 1893 he was in Lewiston working as a draftsman for Elmer I. Thomas.<sup>2</sup> Thomas, who established his practice about 1890, had also worked for Coombs and taken courses at M.I.T. He quickly became Coombs' chief competitor in Lewiston until his premature death in December, 1895, which left William R. Miller to take over the practice.<sup>3</sup>

Although similarly trained, Thomas and Miller had been an unlikely pair. Thomas' short but prolific career produced a number of residences and schools which, stylistically, have little in common with Miller's work. Thomas' restrained use of ornamentation, especially on his Romanesque style public buildings, was sometimes almost austere. Miller, in contrast, developed an obvious fondness for richly ornamented historical styles, particularly the French Renaissance. It is not surprising that residential work played a much less important role in Miller's work than in that of Elmer Thomas, for the growing popularity of the Colonial Revival style left less scope for the designer's own proclivities for picturesque historicism.



Figure 1. Wesley Methodist Church, Bath, c. 1910 view (MHPC).



Figure 2. Great Northern Hotel, Millinocket, c. 1910 view (MHPC).

Little is known of Miller's first few years of independent practice.<sup>4</sup> The unbuilt design for the Lewiston High School, published in 1896, is clearly a product of his association with Elmer I. Thomas.<sup>5</sup> One of the first major documented projects is the Wesley Methodist Church in Bath, begun in 1898 (Figure 1). This large wooden structure, with its asymmetrical massing and picturesque arrangement of towers flanking an entrance porch, was part of the popular trend to translate the traditional masonry Romanesque style into wood frame buildings. Frequently, congregations such as the Methodists in Bath required large structures to support an auditorium plan and Sunday School classes. Miller's Wesley Methodist Church was the first of several similar projects. Its dedication in 1899 was followed by the First Congregational Church in Gray of 1900, the Congregational Church project in Elmwood, Rhode Island of c. 1900, the People's Baptist Church in Bath of 1901-02, and the Universalist Church in Lewiston of 1903.

The new century brought Miller a series of highly visible commissions which established his reputation well beyond Lewiston. Of particular distinction were two hotels, the Great Northern in Millinocket and the Gerald in Fairfield. The Great Northern Hotel was in the tradition of the Shingle Style hotels built in resort areas throughout Maine during the last two decades of the nineteenth century (Figure 2). This large shingled barn-like structure with sweeping gable roofs was embellished with a long Colonial Revival veranda and polygonal towers. Its construction initially provided accommodations for those involved in the creation of the Great Northern Paper Company's "magic city" in the wilderness. It soon

became the "Palace in the Woods" for sportsmen interested in hunting and fishing.<sup>6</sup> Other architectural firms were involved in the construction of the planned community of Millinocket, and Miller also designed an Episcopal Church and two model workers' houses there.

Quite different was Miller's Gerald Hotel in Fairfield, an urban structure which seemed to belong more in a great Victorian city of England than in a small town in central Maine (Figure 3). This lavishly ornate hostelry was built by Amos Gerald, the "streetcar magnate" and resort developer. The principal facade was constructed of pressed brick with white terra cotta panels featuring cherubs, swags, and other Baroque ornamentation. The central pavilion, with curvilinear iron balconies on each floor, was capped by an enclosed roof garden with terra cotta figurines at each corner. The roof of the central tower was surmounted by a figure of Mercury holding electric lights.<sup>7</sup> Although no longer a hotel and sadly altered, the Gerald still has a commanding presence on the Main Street of Fairfield. Amos Gerald later hired Miller to design his resort hotel in South Freeport, "Casco Castle", in 1902, and his own home in Fairfield in 1909.<sup>8</sup> Both structures were based on popular conceptions of medieval castles.

Another important project in Fairfield was the Lawrence Free Library of 1900-01, the first of four libraries by the Lewiston architect (Figure 4). The use of rough quarry-faced stone in constructing colors, round arched fenestration and an octagonal tower were features reminiscent of the series of famous libraries designed by Boston architect H. H. Richardson. The use of French Renaissance dormers may also have been borrowed from Richardson's early

work, although it was also an historical style that Miller himself enthusiastically embraced.<sup>9</sup> The architect's Auburn Library of 1903-04 relies even more heavily on French Renaissance motifs. At the same time, however, Miller was not adverse to combining incongruous historical styles. The brickwork of the Auburn Library, with its lime-rich mortar and hand-made headers, is a clear imitation of 18th century American Georgian.

More unusual is the Cutler Library in Farmington of 1901-02 (Figure 5). This L-shaped granite building has two wings hinged on a circular delivery room. A fan-shaped stack room fills the space between the wings. The entrance is marked by Ionic columns in antis supporting a heavy entablature on one of the wings. A photograph and plan of the Cutler Library was published in *The American Architect* for March 14, 1904. Although it is unlikely that the concept for this arrangement was original to Miller, it is the architect's most successful design for a small library in terms of floor plan and efficient use of limited space.

Residential design seems to have figured less prominently among the architect's commissions. His earliest known house was built in 1898 for William Greenleaf in Auburn. With its large asymmetrical massing and Colonial Revival trim, the Greenleaf House is typical of the residential architecture of the period in the Lewiston-Auburn area. More distinctive are the three identical houses Miller designed for the Penny family in Mechanic Falls in 1900. Only one of these, built for Samuel Penny, survives largely



Figure 3. Gerald Hotel, Fairfield, c. 1910 view (MHPC).



Figure 4. Lawrence Library, Fairfield, c. 1910 view (MHPC).



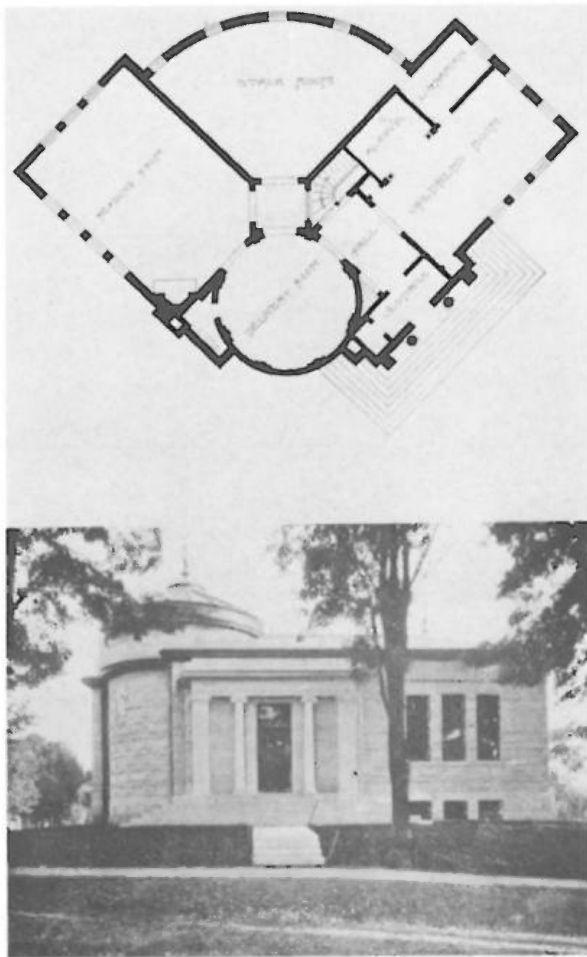


Figure 5. Floor Plan and Principal Elevation of Cutler Library, Farmington, *The American Architect*, March, 1904 (MHPC).

unaltered (Figure 6). It represents a traditional Colonial Revival arrangement with clapboard siding, a hipped roof, and Neo-Classical porticoes. The use of exterior trim, however, is quite lavish, especially for a small mill town in western Maine. As such, it is one of the architect's most distinguished accomplishments.<sup>10</sup> Miller's penchant for picturesque styling is even more apparent in his J. R. Goodspeed House in Wilton, built in 1906-07 (Figure 7). Although employing both Colonial Revival and Arts and Crafts detailing, the Goodspeed House is in essence a Victorian dwelling in the tradition of the Queen Anne style.<sup>11</sup>

By the early 1900s William R. Miller's reputation was established throughout much of southern and western Maine. Although he had designed large buildings in Lewiston, such as the Jordan High School of 1901-02 and the Universalist Church of 1903, major projects were scattered throughout the region. In 1904 Raymond J. Mayo (1878-1966) was hired as a draftsman. Mayo was born in Salem, Massachusetts, and attended North Anson Academy where he graduated in 1897. One source indicates that Mayo worked as a draftsman for Miller about 1900 before taking courses at M.I.T. in 1901 and 1902. He then briefly resided in Philadelphia, where he worked for an unidentified architect, returning to take a position with Miller in October, 1904. Presumably Mayo served as the architect's chief draftsman for two years before becoming a partner in January, 1907.<sup>12</sup>

Miller's reluctance to embrace changing stylistic



Figure 6. Samuel Penny House, Mechanic Falls, 1988 view by Richard W. Cheek.

trends in architecture is evident in his late work, of which the Lawrence High School in Fairfield is a good example (Figure 8). The national trends in school design during the early 1900s encouraged the construction of two story Neo-Classical buildings with high basements and flat roofs. An emphasis on fire-proof materials and a consequent discouragement of heavy ornamentation was common. Like all of his school buildings, Miller's Lawrence High School of 1906-07 ran counter to this approach. The Fairfield school featured a French Renaissance design with multiple hipped roofs, "Chateausque" dormers and heavy sculptured brackets supporting wide overhanging eaves. Located opposite the town common, few communities the size of Fairfield could have boasted such an elegantly styled school. A similar, larger design had been used for his Morse High School in Bath in 1903. Both of these buildings, as well as several other schools by Miller, eventually suffered serious fires.

William R. Miller and Raymond J. Mayo practiced as partners in Lewiston for about a year before relocating to Portland in 1908. That the move was good for business is evident in the firm's ability to secure major commissions in both Lewiston and Portland, as well as elsewhere in the state, over the next twenty years.

Roger G. Reed

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *Industrial Journal*, Bangor, November 6, 1891. Plans were also submitted by R. P. Walker of Brownfield, William E. Barry of Kennebunk, Elmer I. Thomas of Auburn, Wilfred E. Mansur of Bangor, and Charles S. Frost, a Lewiston native then practicing in Chicago. Frost's design was selected.
- <sup>2</sup> Background information on Miller is derived from his obituary in the *Portland Sunday Telegram*, December 14, 1929; Lewiston City Directories; The MIT Museum, Michael Yaetes, Assistant Curator. Miller's Portland obituary mentions travel abroad. This may have taken place in 1896 or 1897 when he is unaccountably absent from published accounts of building activity.
- <sup>3</sup> For information on Elmer I. Thomas, see the Maine Historic Preservation Commission's architect files, Augusta. That Miller succeeded Thomas, see *Lewiston Evening Journal*, April 18, 1896. In December, 1896, it was announced that the Carpenter's Union of Lewiston would open a night school for drafting. Miller was hired to provide instruction. *Portland Transcript*, December 16, 1896.
- <sup>4</sup> See Note 1, above.
- <sup>5</sup> *Lewiston Evening Journal*, April 18, 1896.
- <sup>6</sup> A more elaborate variation of the Great Northern was proposed for a resort on Bear Island in Brunswick. A drawing of this project appeared in the *Lewiston Saturday Journal*, February 7, 1903.
- <sup>7</sup> *Industrial Journal*, June 1, 1900. The interior was painted by a Boston artist, H. C. Aiken. The terra cotta was from Perth Amboy, New Jersey. The balconies and sections above the cornice were removed some years ago.



Figure 7. J. R. Goodspeed House, Wilton, c. 1910 view (MHPC).

- <sup>8</sup> The two men probably first came into contact with Miller's design for the large carbarn for Gerald's Lewiston, Brunswick and Bath Electric Railway of 1899. That structure burned in 1903.
- <sup>9</sup> An early photograph of Miller in his office shows a picture of a French Chateau (or an American version of one) on a table behind him.
- <sup>10</sup> *The Industrial Journal*, June 1, 1900, mistakenly refers to the clients as the "Perry Brothers".
- <sup>11</sup> The drawings are labeled, "William R. Miller", although the house was completed in 1906 by Miller and Mayo.
- <sup>12</sup> *Somerset Reporter*, Skowhegan, September 22, 1904; obituary in *Lewiston Evening Journal*, February 14, 1966, p. 2; The MIT Museum, Michael Yaetes, Assistant Curator; Lewiston City Directories; *Lewiston Evening Journal*, January 4, 1907.

## LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS BY WILLIAM R. MILLER

F. L. Dingley House, Auburn, 1897, Not Executed.  
 Lewiston Daily Journal Building, 12-16 Lisbon Street, Lewiston, 1897, Destroyed.  
 C. M. Rice Block, Market Square, Houlton, 1897, Extant.  
 William Greenleaf House, 9 Vine Street, Auburn, 1898, Extant.  
 Wesley Methodist Church, Washington Street, Bath, 1898-99, Extant.  
 The Lewiston, Brunswick and Bath Street Railway Company Carbarn, Lower Lisbon Street, Lewiston, 1899, Destroyed.\*  
 Gerald Hotel, Fairfield, 1899-1900, Altered.\*  
 Great Northern Hotel, Millinocket, 1900, Destroyed.\*  
 School, Winthrop Center, 1900, Destroyed.\*  
 Wilson School, Dunn Street, Auburn, 1900, Destroyed.  
 Lawrence Library, Fairfield, 1900-01, Extant.\*  
 Samuel R. Penney House, 38 Maple Street, Mechanic Falls, 1900, Extant.  
 Almont R. Penney House, 36 Maple Street, Mechanic Falls, 1900, Destroyed.  
 Charles V. Penney House, Spring Street (Relocated to Pleasant Street), Mechanic Falls, 1900, Altered.  
 Knights of Pythias Block, South Paris, 1900, Altered.  
 First Congregational Church, Gray, 1900, Extant.  
 Congregational Church, Elmwood, Rhode Island, c. 1900, Not Executed.\*  
 H. B. Estes Cottage, Pine Point, Old Orchard, c. 1900, Extant.  
 Two Houses for Great Northern Paper Company, Millinocket, c. 1900, Unlocated.\*  
 Snell House Hotel, Houlton, 1901, Destroyed.  
 Hotel Rumford, Additions, Rumford Falls, 1901, Destroyed.

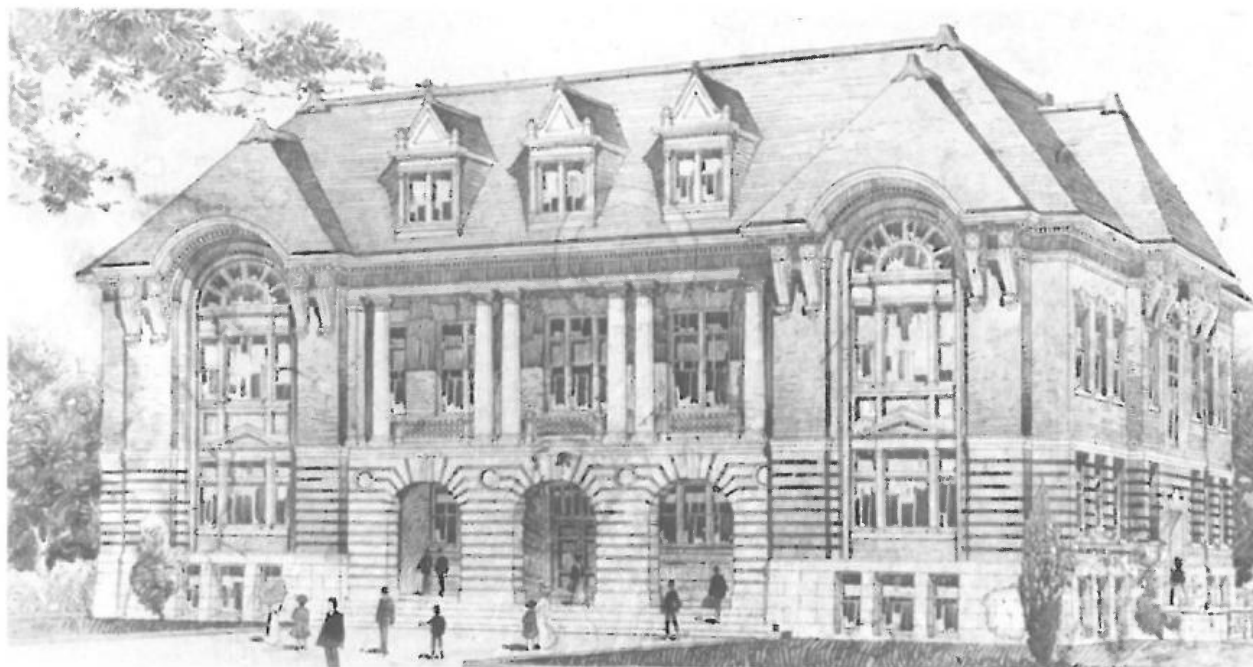


Figure 8. Rendering of Lawrence High School, Fairfield, c. 1906, J.C. Halden, delineator (MHPC).

Jordan High School, Lewiston, 1901-02, Extant.\*  
 Cutler Library, Farmington, 1901-02, Extant.\*  
 People's Baptist Church, Bath, 1901-02, Destroyed.\*  
 Casco Castle and Tower, South Freeport, 1902, Destroyed  
 (Tower Extant).  
 Episcopal Church, Millinocket, 1902, Altered.\*  
 St. Mary's Hospital, Lewiston, 1902, Extant.  
 Fire Station, Waterville, 1903, Not Executed.  
 Hotel, Bear Island, Brunswick, 1903, Not Executed.  
 Hotel, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, 1903, Unlocated.  
 Hotel, Bras d'Or Lake, Nova Scotia, 1903, Unlocated.  
 McGillicuddy Block, Lisbon Street, Lewiston, 1903, Altered.\*  
 Beta Theta Pi Fraternity, 19 McKen Street, Brunswick, 1903,  
 Altered.  
 Universalist Church, Sabattus Avenue, Lewiston, 1903, Extant.\*  
 George W. Bean House, 67 Webster Street, Lewiston, 1903,  
 Altered.  
 Coburn Dormitory, Colby College, Waterville, 1903, Destroyed.\*  
 Manual Training Building (L. C. Bates Museum), Good Will  
 Home, Hinckley, 1903, Extant.\*  
 Morse High School, Bath, 1903, Destroyed.\*  
 High School, South Paris, 1903, Destroyed.  
 School, Wilton, 1903, Destroyed.  
 R. H. Greenleaf Block, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1903-04,  
 Destroyed.  
 Five Cottages for C. F. Maines, Lewiston, 1903, Unlocated.  
 Portland Paper Company Office, Mechanic Falls, 1903, Probably  
 Not Executed.  
 Carnegie Library, Waterville, 1903-04, Extant.  
 Carnegie Library, Auburn, 1903-04, Extant.  
 St. Mark's Parish House, Augusta, 1904, Not Executed.  
 Bancroft-Foote Cottage, Good Will Home, Hinckley, 1904,  
 Altered.

Somerset Railroad Station, Madison, 1904, Extant.  
 A. H. Shaw Stable, High Street, Bath, 1904, Extant.\*  
 Administration Building, Maine Industrial School for Girls,  
 Hallowell, 1905, Extant.  
 High School, Lisbon Falls, 1905, Extant.  
 Fire Station, Skowhegan, 1905, Extant.  
 H. A. Furbish Bank, Rangeley, 1905, Extant.  
 H. D. Manley House, Auburn, 1905, Probably Not Executed.  
 General J. A. Hill Tomb, Oak Hill Cemetery, Auburn, 1905,  
 Extant.\*  
 Charles R. Moody School, Good Will Home, Hinckley, 1905-06,  
 Extant.\*  
 Monumental Tower, Good Will Home, Hinckley, c. 1905, Not  
 Executed.\*  
 Lawrence High School, Fairfield, 1906-07, Altered.\*  
 J. R. Goodspeed House, Village View Road, Wilton, 1906-07,  
 Extant.\*  
 J. R. Fairchild House, Hoyts Island, Belgrade, c. 1906, Unlocated.  
 Hotel for George Pike, West Stewartstown, New Hampshire,  
 Undated and Unlocated.\*

\*Architectural drawings at the Maine Historical Society, Portland.

## ARCHITECTURAL DRAWINGS

Maine Historical Society maintains a collection of drawings by William R. Miller and successor firms. These consist primarily of working drawings on linen. When drawings exist they are noted with asterisks in the list of commissions. In addition, the Maine Historic Preservation Commission has plans and elevations for the Somerset Railroad Station in Madison.

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Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr., Editor  
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